

country for which Rylee McCollum gave his life.

AFGHANISTAN

Madam President, now I want to talk about the fall of Afghanistan. It is the thing that people in Wyoming want to talk about. They want to talk about Rylee, and they want to talk about what happened in Afghanistan.

Over the last 20 years, nearly 2,500 Americans gave their lives in Afghanistan. Our mission in Afghanistan was twofold: first, to kill the terrorists who attacked us on 9/11/2001, and, second, to take away the safe haven where terrorists planned attacks on America.

For the last 20 years, both missions were a success. Yet, in a matter of just weeks, everything changed, and they changed because of the complete incompetence of President Joe Biden. Because of that incompetence, the Taliban are stronger today than they were 20 years ago. They are stronger than ever. Afghanistan is now a safe haven for terrorists, and America is more at risk to terrorists today than it has been in two decades.

Afghanistan fell because President Biden paid exclusive attention to the calendar on the wall instead of the conditions on the ground. Joe Biden set an arbitrary political deadline of August 31.

The President wanted symbolism for September 11. Well, he got symbolism, but it wasn't what he wanted. It was the kind of symbolism that terrorists wanted.

Now, in April, when President Biden announced his deadline, I warned this would happen. I said, if we pulled out, the Taliban would take over. Leader McCONNELL and other Senate Republicans came and warned the President as well. Some of the top generals in our military warned the President also. Yet President Biden stubbornly refused to listen. He refused to listen to his military and refused to listen to his national security advisers.

Our enemies knew we were leaving, and so they were on the offense. In a matter of weeks, Afghanistan fell to the Taliban. It was predictable, and it was preventable.

When Kabul fell, President Biden was on vacation. So were the Secretary of State and the White House Press Secretary. When British Prime Minister Boris Johnson tried to reach President Biden, he had to wait 36 hours. When the Canadian Prime Minister wanted to discuss Afghanistan, he couldn't get through to President Biden, but he got through to Hillary Clinton. The White House was asleep at the switch, and the White House switchboard was turned off to our closest allies.

Even after Kabul fell, President Biden stuck with his reckless and dangerous deadline, and as a result, President Biden has abandoned hundreds of Americans behind enemy lines. Many are still trapped there right now. I can't imagine any other President in the history of our country doing that, abandoning Americans behind enemy lines.

He also abandoned thousands of Afghan people who have helped us over the years. They helped our troops. That even includes an interpreter who helped save the President's life when he visited Afghanistan as a Senator. Many of these people are going to be killed by terrorists. President Biden signed their death warrants.

This is worse than Benghazi. This is worse than the Iranian hostage crisis. This is worse than the withdrawal from Vietnam. To me, this is America's worst national humiliation in more than 50 years. Simply stated, the fall of Afghanistan is a dereliction of duty—a dereliction of duty—by the Commander in Chief.

Joe Biden ran for President on two things. One, he raced on competence, and on foreign policy expertise. He has failed this entire Nation on both.

Nearly every prediction that President Biden made about Afghanistan has proven to be wrong.

On July 8, President Biden said there would be “no circumstance”—no circumstance—“where you [would] see people being lifted off the roof of the embassy of the United States from Afghanistan.” Just 5 weeks later, that is exactly the video of what the world saw.

President Biden claimed al-Qaida is gone from Afghanistan. Just hours later, the Pentagon had to admit that what the President said was not true. The President had lied to the American people. ISIS fighters are also in Afghanistan. They are the ones who killed the 13 servicemembers. Russians and Iranians are also in Afghanistan.

The President's hasty withdrawal left behind billions of dollars' worth of American weapons. Now it is all property of the terrorists. Joe Biden armed the terrorists beyond their wildest dreams. In total, the Taliban has seized more than 600,000 American weapons; 2,000 armored vehicles—humvees, American tanks; and 40 aircraft, including Black Hawk helicopters. Because of the incompetence of President Biden, the Taliban is now the best armed terrorist group in history. President Biden surrendered to the terrorists, and now the terrorists will be coming for us.

I join with my fellow Republicans in demanding a full accounting of American military equipment in Afghanistan. President Biden has absolutely no plan to either get the weapons back or to destroy them where they are. Instead, President Biden is making excuses. He claims he had to follow President Trump's withdrawal agreement. Well, that is not true, and we know it. President Trump's plan was conditioned on successful peace talks with the Afghan Government. Those talks are still unsuccessful.

President Biden has overturned dozens of policies from the previous administration. Let's look at a few of the Trump policies that President Biden reversed.

Well, he reversed the very successful “Remain in Mexico” policy, which has

resulted in a complete collapse of our border security. He tried to bring back the Iran deal. He put us back in the Paris accord. He rejoined the World Health Organization. So why didn't, then, President Biden either enforce the original withdrawal agreement from Afghanistan or renegotiate that agreement? He never even tried.

President Biden even chose to give up Bagram Air Force Base, north of Kabul. It is a strategic military location that military leaders will tell you should never have been abandoned under any circumstances. It is probably the only facility big enough to get every American out quickly. We left there in the middle of the night without even telling our allies on the ground. The U.S. Senate must investigate why the President ordered the military to abandon it.

The United States, I believe, has a sacred duty to finish the job of safely evacuating every American civilian in Afghanistan.

The President said on national television just a few weeks before the collapse that he would not leave Afghanistan and would not follow the directive that he had placed, the August 31 deadline, until every American was out. Yet, on August 30, he had every American servicemember out, and his own Secretary of State said there were still up to 200 American citizens trapped behind enemy lines. I believe we also have to evacuate the Afghans who risked their lives by providing us with assistance.

I believe the United States must never recognize the Taliban as a legitimate government. The Biden administration claimed they would not recognize any government which came to power by force in Afghanistan. I find it very hard to trust anything that President Biden says anymore.

Let me conclude with a word about our heroes who served our country in Afghanistan. Over my time in the Senate, I visited Afghanistan nine times. Each time I go, it is to say “thank you” to the men and women in uniform who are there. I visit with Wyoming National Guard. I visit with Wyoming regular military. Our National Guard, our Cowboy Cannoneers, have been deployed to Bagram Air Force Base, and I visited with them numerous times over a number of years. To them and to all Americans, I say, no matter how disgraceful this withdrawal, no matter how incompetent our Commander in Chief, no matter the failures of this administration, the truth remains: Our soldiers served with honor, they fought with valor, and they have kept us safe and free for the last 20 years. They are all heroes. We will always—always—hold them in high honor.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Maine.

Mr. KING. Madam President, I have comments today about an extraordinary member of the Federal workforce, but before I do, I would like to

respond to a few of the comments that I heard as I entered the Chamber with regard to Afghanistan.

The first is, nobody I know of in any way is denigrating the service of the men and women who served in Afghanistan for 20 years. They served honorably. They served well. They served bravely. They made great sacrifices, and some of them made the ultimate sacrifice. There is no dispute about that. But I think the question of the leaving of Afghanistan is worth a little bit of a broader discussion than what we just heard.

No. 1, the decision to leave Afghanistan was made by the Trump administration. Then-President Trump entered into an agreement in February of 2020 with the Taliban that we would leave by May 1 of 2021; all troops would be gone. I have read the agreement. In return, the Taliban said that they would not attack our troops. They also said they would enter into discussions with the Government of Afghanistan and try to effect a peaceful transfer of power. Of course, that didn't happen.

But I think it is very important for the American people to realize that the fundamental decision to leave Afghanistan was made almost a year before Joe Biden entered the Presidency. When Joe Biden entered the Presidency, he had a decision to make, and the decision was a very straightforward and very profound one. It was whether to honor the agreement that his predecessor had made and keep the word of the United States or whether to stay in Afghanistan, tear up that agreement, subject our people there to attacks by the Taliban, and then almost inevitably reescalate the conflict.

We were down—at the time of the agreement in February of 2020, there were something like 15,000 American troops. By the time President Biden came into office, there were only 2,500 American troops. If he had decided to stay, it wasn't a question of, we will just stay with our 2,500 troops; we would have been at war with the Taliban, and we would have inevitably—he, the President, Biden, would have inevitably been in a situation to increase our presence in Afghanistan once again after 20 years.

President Biden decided that our mission there was complete. The original mission, of course, was about Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida. And he decided that the American people were not prepared to commit to a war that essentially had no end. So that is point one.

Point two: There is no question that the leaving was chaotic and difficult and dangerous, but I think it is important to understand some of the surrounding circumstances. For example, I was one who stood on this floor in June and berated the administration for not moving aggressively enough to get those who helped our troops out.

The Presiding Officer, I think, took that position. Many of us took that position. We were hammering the admin-

istration. But then the President met with President Ghani on June 25 in person, and Ghani specifically said: Please don't start that evacuation in a major way because that in itself will lead to the collapse of our government; it will lead to a loss of confidence. So please don't do that.

So then the question became, when, if we withdrew our troops, would the Afghan Government fail? And we are going to be having hearings here this week, next week, the week after, to discuss that very question: What was the intelligence? I am a member of the Select Committee on Intelligence, and I can't talk about what I learned from the intelligence officials leading up to August of 2021. But the question is, Did the administration expect the Afghan Government to fall in a matter of days—8 days, I believe? I think clearly they did not. Should they? Was it a failure of intelligence? I don't believe so.

Intelligence is about data. It is about how many troops, how many guns? Who has the arms? Who holds what territory? The most difficult intelligence questions are psychological: Will the Afghan Army fight? Will they have the will to fight? Indeed, the Afghan security forces have fought for years and lost thousands. But when President Ghani fled the country, the government simply collapsed, and the Afghan security forces essentially said: Why should we fight if the government has gone?

I have heard it said that we left—I think my colleague from Wyoming said we left over 200 Americans or 150 trapped. A hundred or so have left in the last few days, left on a charter flight a couple of days ago. Yes, it is more difficult for them to get out, but the administration is working to get them out. The question is, Should the administration have stayed and triggered a possible conflict with the Taliban and attacks by terrorists, which did occur at the gate of the airport, versus the evacuation of everyone? And it was very difficult to determine, A, who these people were, and B, whether or not some of them wanted to leave. They were dual citizens. So that was a difficult decision.

My understanding is that the military advice to the President was that it was in America's interest to abide by the August 31 deadline and continue to work diplomatically to enable American citizens to leave. In fact, my understanding from public reports is the Taliban has essentially said: If you are an American citizen, if you have the paperwork, we will let you leave. So those people weren't trapped.

What bothers me about this conversation is the ignoring of the fact that 124,000 people were evacuated in 18 days, the largest airlift in history—124,000 people, including about 6,000 Americans, people from NATO, our NATO allies, and thousands of Afghans who were those people who assisted us.

Did we get them all out? I doubt it. But I can remember, as I am sure the

Presiding Officer can, earlier this year, we were talking about 18,000 of those SIVs. We got out 124,000 people. It was a logistical—it was an incredible logistical and diplomatic achievement.

There are plenty of questions left. There are questions to be answered. My problem is concluding that it was a disaster, concluding that the President did it all wrong, concluding and reaching conclusions without the facts. Let's have our hearings. Let's find out what actually happened. What was the intelligence? What did the administration know? What was the basis of the military advice to leave on August 31?

But also, part of the facts is what was achieved: 124,000 people who are now being housed and fed and vetted and treated for, examined for medical conditions. It is an amazing logistical achievement.

If you are talking about the armed services, let's talk about ready, aim, fire, not ready, fire, aim. Let's hold our fire until we understand what actually happened. I believe that is what we should do in this country responsibly rather than immediately going on the offensive and declaring the President incompetent and a disaster and should resign and all of those things.

We ought to understand what actually happened, and we will. That is our role. We should work through the process of gaining the facts before we draw the conclusions that I have heard drawn over the last week.

TRIBUTE TO TIM HUDSON

Madam President, let me change the subject. We have, throughout the Federal Government, wonderful people working for us. We have people working in all the Agencies. They work diligently; they work for many years; they work under difficult conditions; and they serve the American people. We speak of ourselves as public servants, but there are also public servants who are out there every day answering phone calls, doing the work of the government in whatever Agency, wherever they are, and they are doing important work.

I want to talk about one of them today just for a couple of minutes, a guy named Tim Hudson. Tim's mustache is a lot better than mine. Tim Hudson is retiring this week after 54 years with the National Park Service—54 years with the National Park Service. That is dedication to the public service. He has served in Alaska. He has served at Yellowstone. He came East after Superstorm Sandy to supervise the reconstruction and maintenance of national parks in the East. He is an expert on maintenance, on keeping these places up to speed, up to snuff, so that our citizens can enjoy them.

He came out of retirement or he slowed his retirement to do his last 5 years in the State of Maine. President Obama created Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument, a spectacular spot in the middle of the North Woods of Maine. It was somewhat controversial at the time. I spent days up